From Softdisk to Deathmatch

The life and times of John Romero

Review by Kay Savetz

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Author: John Romero
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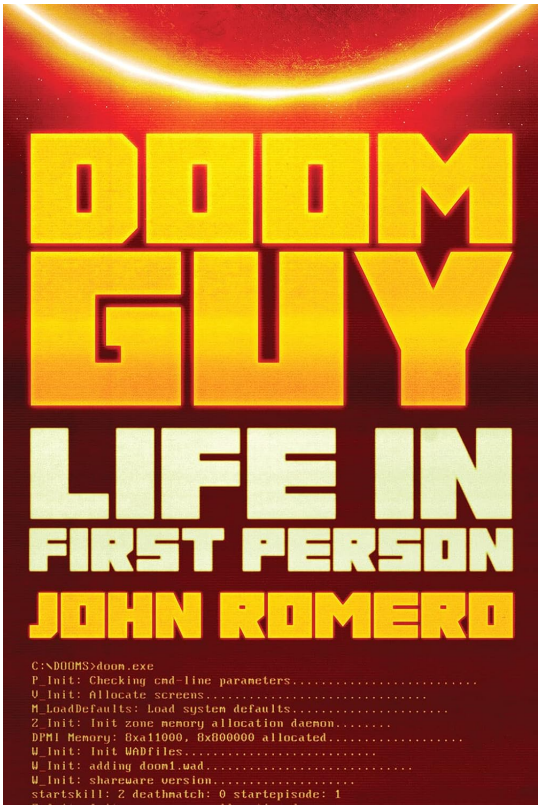

DOOM Guy is the autobiography of John Romero, Softdisk alumnus and co-creator of Wolfenstein 3-D, Doom, and Quake. His games popularized the first-person shooter genre. He coined the term "deathmatch". And his auspicious career started with a love of arcade games — and an Apple II Plus.

The first half of *DOOM Guy* is interesting and often surprising. Romero's tales of his fraught childhood, learning to program, and the successes and troubles of creating and selling his first games are a treat. By contrast, the second half — starting roughly after the release of DOOM II in 1994—is a slog, a seemingly endless series of business tribulations, hirings and firings, and tedious descriptions of level design in various first-person shooters. I would have abandoned the book several times over if I hadn't promised to review it. As Romero's life — and the computer industry in general — transitioned from single-person and small-group programming activities to large-scale, corporate endeavors, they become far less interesting to read about.

But that first two hundred pages is an entertaining and, at times, heartbreaking story of a smart kid who grew up poor, sometimes homeless, with abusive parents. A kid who hustled for time in front of a computer, taught himself assembly language from books,

and had his face slammed into the glass of an Asteroids machine by an angry stepfather. A kid who sold games to magazines inCider, Nibble, A+, and Uptime. A young man who co-founded id Software, co-created the Commander Keen series, Wolfenstein 3-D, and Doom. A person who thinks critically and carefully about how to craft games that wow players from a technical perspective then keep them engaged.

Romero writes of his childhood in Colorado and Arizona: “Even the challenging aspects of my life the poverty and alcoholic chaos had an upside: I learned to escape into my imagination as a protective device. Behind my drawings of trucks and cars, I imagined whole stories: what life would be like as a trucker or someone who raced a super sports car... Because we didn’t have any games that kids could play, I had to make my own fun and games from things I found in the desert or around the house. These early experiences are foundational to the game designer I would later become.”

There are plenty of references to the Apple II and KansasFest throughout the book. Romero writes that one of the sweetest moments tied to Wolfenstein 3-D’s release occurred during the 1992 KansasFest, when he was able to show his 3D sequel to Silas Warner, creator of the original Castle Wolfenstein. Then there’s the intriguing story of hiring a technically-competent KansasFest attendee to port Wolfenstein 3-D to Super Nintendo. That subcontractor “completely flaked” on the job, leaving Romero in the lurch. (He never reveals the identity of the flaky programmer, but well-versed readers might have a guess.)

“I just want to code... The best times I ever had in game dev involved me coding for hours and hours and hours,” Romero writes. A reader might assume that, after some time, such endless work would have stopped being fun— especially since Romero had a family. But based on his telling, one might surmise that he could not possibly have been a parent who was present in any way for his child. Slogging through paragraph after paragraph about working on one project after another, story after story of crunch mode — working all day and night, sleeping under desks — was I supposed to applaud Romero’s dedication and work ethic? I mostly just felt sorry for his family.

There is one story near the end of the book that spoke to the archivist in me: the near destruction by flood of Romero’s meticulous library of what he had created, including Apple II floppy disks, the letters he wrote to magazines as a kid, unpublished games and tech demos, design documents and hand-drawn art. “This near-fatal brush to my archives brought me face-to-face with its historic value, and shortly thereafter I donated and continue to donate parts of it to the Strong National Museum of Play.”

Someone who is a die-hard fan of his shooters and who wants to relish every bit of corporate management and mess that went in to creating them might feel differently; otherwise, you have my blessing to read the first half of *DOOM Guy*, then set it down.

A review copy of this book was provided by the publisher.

Find Kay on Bluesky.

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